

The genocide against the Ovaherero and Nama peoples

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The German colonization of what became German South West Africa commenced in 1884 and ended with German forces' surrender to the Union of South Africa in July 1915. The genocidal atrocities committed by German colonial troops from 1904–1908, sanctioned by General Lothar von Trotha's 1904 and 1905 orders to exterminate the Ovaherero and Nama, significantly changed the course of history and socio-economic status of the people who lived in Namibia at that time, as well as generations of their descendants.

It should be common knowledge by now that this genocide decimated the Nama and Ovaherero populations at the time: up to 80 percent of the Ovaherero, more than half of the Nama and a significant percentage of the Damara and San were killed during the 1904–1908 war. Some of the immediate consequences of the genocide included the expulsion of native populations from communally-owned lands, mass killings (i.e. massacres), appropriation of livestock (confiscation without compensation and the forbidding of livestock ownership) and appropriation of land for settlers. Additional consequences included forced labor, rape of native girls and women, theft of human remains taken to Germany for so-called "racial science" research, and confinement in concentration camps. That period still negatively affects the country's economic landscape today: land appropriation destroyed decedents' economic livelihoods.

I believe less known and discussed is the impact the rape of young girls and women, as well as massacres (especially of women and children), forced labor, and confinement in concentration camps, had on the psyche of the survivors. Similar negative impacts surely affect those in the diaspora, who bear the additional burden of being second-class citizens and, as a result, losing their culture and identity. There is no doubt that the present-day socio-economic challenges confronting us as a people are "scars" left by the genocidal atrocities committed more than a century ago.

Sam Geiseb is a member of the Namibian Nama Genocide Technical Committee.

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